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The Director of Central Intelligence  
Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC 07192-84  
27 December 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: Herbert E. Meyer  
Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT: Why Are the Russians So Frightened by "Star Wars"?

1. So bitter and vitriolic is the debate over President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative -- the so-called "Star Wars" proposal -- and so disturbing is the friction this initiative has generated between ourselves and our allies, that we are all but ignoring the effect that SDI is having on the Soviets: it is absolutely scaring hell out of them. Indeed, never before have the Soviets voiced such alarm over a US national-security initiative, or scrambled so furiously to de-rail such an initiative, as they have since the President announced back in March 1983 that henceforth the US would begin to move away from Mutual Assured Destruction, that hideous defense doctrine which literally requires that our entire population remain exposed to nuclear annihilation; we would, said the President, move instead toward development and deployment of technologies that will stop incoming missiles and thus protect us from a nuclear holocaust.

2. We need to understand why the Russians are so frightened by "Star Wars." The answer not only tells us a great deal about our nation's chief adversary but, in a curious and even profound way, it illuminates a great deal about why SDI -- which in poll after poll has won support by an overwhelming majority of US voters -- has generated so much opposition from those American and European intellectuals who dominate the Western foreign-policy and defense establishments.

3. To understand the Soviet point of view, just for a moment consider SDI from the perspective of a Kremlin leader. First, you would have to assume that the Americans will succeed in developing and deploying technologies capable of stopping your missiles. One need only grasp the astounding progress of physics during the last twenty years to imagine how far the science might progress during the next two decades.



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Moreover, no one ever made money betting against the US when it decides to combine its scientific and technological prowess with its industrial and entrepreneurial might; the Manhattan and Apollo Projects come to mind.

4. Allowing the Americans to develop and deploy the world's only strategic defense system would be unthinkable. The political impact would devastate Moscow even before the damn thing was up and working. More precisely, from the moment a perception began to take hold around the world that the Americans were on the road to success, Moscow's capacity to influence events through its only source of leverage -- fear of physical attack -- would begin to diminish. After all, once the Americans were invulnerable to attack there would be nothing to stop them from coming to the aid of allies who dared stand up to the Soviets. Moscow's ultimate threat -- that you had better do as we say because the Americans won't help you -- would evaporate. A re-distribution of global power could occur in the years immediately before and after deployment of a US strategic defense system that would leave Moscow on the ropes.

5. As a prudent Kremlin leader, then, you would have no choice but to order development of a Soviet SDI to counter the American one, and by doing so keep the score even. But you could not be certain of success. Seven decades of communism have wrecked Soviet science. To be sure, many Soviet scientists are first-rate by any standards. And their ability to achieve incremental technical advances in some fields remains impressive. But in Soviet science -- as in all other fields of endeavor -- too many hacks have been promoted over too many competent men and women for too many years. The brightest and the best have been demoralized, demoted, and all too often discredited for real or trumped-up political offenses. The number of world-class Soviet scientists who have gone into exile, voluntarily or under KGB auspices, is too high to overcome. So long as the job is merely to build a more accurate missile, or a more potent warhead, or a faster submarine, Soviet science is up to it. But to pull off something as radically different, as big in size and scope as a strategic defense system -- well, Soviet science may no longer have what it takes.

6. As a Kremlin leader, then, you would have no choice but to adopt a two-track approach: to try to match the American SDI while simultaneously developing an alternative in case this matching effort should fail. That is, in addition to building your own strategic defense system you would order up enough new heavy missiles to overwhelm the US system by brute force. On the very conservative assumption that the US system would be capable of shooting down just 80% of all incoming missiles, to make certain that the number of your missiles that actually reach US targets would be the same as the number that would reach US targets without a defensive system, you would need to launch -- according to the best available calculations -- five times the number of Soviet heavy missiles you have right now. More precisely, to the 1,400 SS-18 and other offensive missiles you now have in silos, you will need to add another 5,600 missiles and silos.

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7. This, then, is how SDI looks to a Soviet leader. At first blush, it's hard to see why he or his colleagues should be so upset. They need only to build their own system while developing a fallback plan in case of failure or delay.

8. There is just one little problem with such a sensible, rational two-track approach to countering SDI: the Soviets can't do it. First, they haven't got enough money. Keep in mind that the Soviet economy is slightly more than half the size of the US economy. If one assumes that the cost of a strategic defense system would be the same for them as for us, the economic burden on the Soviets will be nearly twice as heavy. Moreover, while our economy is robust theirs is stagnant. They need to divert more money each year merely to import food -- mostly from the US and for which they pay hard cash. Far-flung Soviet colonies such as Cuba and Vietnam have developed insatiable appetites for economic aid. The East European satellites are increasingly restless due to their own stagnation, and since the Soviets can't afford to provide more aid they must increase the level of military power to prevent political upheaval. And within the Soviet Union itself, the population boom among non-Russians is beginning to bleed the economy white as demand rises inexorably for roads, schools, hospitals, and so forth. Now add to the cost of building a Soviet strategic defense system the cost of quintupling the offensive Soviet missile force. That is an awful lot of very big rockets, very powerful warheads, and very expensive holes in the ground.

9. The Soviets might be able to afford their own strategic defense system, assuming their scientists can do it. And they might be able to afford a quintupling of their offensive missile force. But they cannot afford both. We are not talking here about nickel-and-dime expenditures of a sort that can be managed with a bit of belt-tightening here, a dollop of repression there, and a societal talent born of practice to always, somehow muddle through. We are talking here about a combination of expenses that Soviet leaders genuinely fear would send their already stagnant economy into a tailspin, or maybe even break its back.

10. Moreover, the Soviets haven't got enough energy to undertake a project as new and radical as development of a high-tech strategic defense system. Again, such a system requires much, much more than just a few incremental steps forward. It requires a stupendous, revolutionary leap of imagination, will, and organization. The fundamental re-orienting of a nation's scientific and technical communities, the integration of these communities with the industrial base, the need to cope with the diplomatic consequences of a strategic-defense competition, and the effort required to shift a nation's military structure away from Mutual Assured Destruction and toward a world in which deterrence is based on protecting human beings rather than holding them hostage to nuclear attack -- all this is utterly beyond the capacity of a dictatorship whose leaders are dying off and jockeying for power among

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themselves, and whose dreams of conquest have reduced them to such revolting products as those little red toy airplanes they are scattering throughout Afghanistan, intended solely to be picked up by children, and designed with explosive devices that blow off a child's arms so that Afghan parents will be discouraged from resisting the Soviet forces that now occupy their country.

11. SDI, then, is much more than a piece of hardware. It is a symbol. And it is this symbol -- what SDI says about the United States -- that the Soviets recognized instantly and which has frightened them so badly. SDI means that our financial resources to defend ourselves exceed the Soviet Union's financial resources to threaten us. More important, SDI means that we still have the will to defend ourselves; that we have the energy and imagination to break the nuclear balance of terror that has become the Soviet Union's primary source of global power and influence. SDI is a symbol of our confidence in science, in technology, and in our own ability to manage both and to combine them with industrial and entrepreneurial power to preserve our freedom. SDI is a soaring affirmation of faith in ourselves.

12. SDI, then, is the Soviets' worst nightmare. It means we aren't going to crumble. It means that they will not defeat the West and will not displace the United States as the world's pre-eminent superpower. It means the so-called Red Tide they once thought would drown the Free World is now cresting, and will soon begin to recede. SDI means that history is not at all on their side, but on ours.



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